

Ma Bell's Newest Grandchild: VOIP

By Tennessee Regulatory Authority Chairman

Deborah Taylor Tate



Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) is an exciting, new technology that will allow you to make a telephone call utilizing your internet connection instead of your traditional telephone. Some say this is another technology revolution like the internet. If you are one of the approximately 1.5 million Tennesseans who have access to a fast internet connection, then VoIP may be for you.

VoIP offers unlimited calling throughout the country at a fraction of the cost of a standard telephone line. Just this week, AT&T introduced Internet telephone service in San Francisco and New York, which provides phone service, complete with unlimited local and long distance calling, at a flat rate of \$40 a month. In addition, international calls using VoIP are usually very inexpensive. But before you get too excited, remember that the service requires a fast internet connection, which tends to cost an additional \$30 a month.

Is special equipment needed? You may need a “black box” similar to a cable box, a microphone for your computer or a special phone that is attached to your home network. However, one of the newest forms of VoIP technology allows users to call friends and relatives that use traditional landline or mobile phones. Companies like Packet8, VoicePulse, Voiceglo and Vonage are already offering these services in some parts of Tennessee.

Other innovative features allow all your communications devices to be connected: VoIP, email, fax, and cell phone. You could actually receive phone messages as email or allow the network to page several devices, and immediately forward a call to your cellphone, office phone, Blackberry, PDA or a pager.

You can even instruct the system to block incoming calls during certain periods of the day, and can receive calls placed to your home phone number anywhere you can plug into a high-speed Internet connection—a cyber café in San Juan or your local Starbucks or even the public library.

You may be wondering if VoIP could be used to replace your traditional phone line entirely? Some users are doing just that, but there are some things to keep in mind before you make the switch.

* Not all VoIP providers offer access to 911 emergency service. So read the fine print. Unfortunately, some consumers have found out they don't have 911 when they try to call and really need it. Recently an emergency call from an airport in Houston was routed to Nashville.

* Some providers may not be capable of providing you a phone number in your local area. In this instance, your neighbors' calls to you might incur long distance charges.

* Your phone number will not appear in the local phone book or be listed with directory assistance;

* How often does your cable, internet access or power go out? If it does go out, you lose your phone service also;

* While voice quality is usually as good as traditional phone lines, some VoIP products may have occasional glitches such as echoes and slight delays especially if you are downloading photos or a long article from the internet;

And, if you think all this is exciting, you won't believe what is next: voice over electric lines and through your gas pipeline. What will they think of next?

If you would like to learn more about VOIP, the TRA will host a day-long forum with VOIP providers, national experts and representatives from the Federal Communications Commission on Friday, April 30, 2004 to help inform the public about this new technology. A portion of the forum will be dedicated to public policy issues such as E-911, funding for rural and high cost areas, as well as other issues noted above. You may also visit our website to read additional articles and get more information about the Forum at www.state.tn.us/tra.